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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000238

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/13/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER LE IS SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: ACTING FOREIGN MINISTER ACCEPTS

DEMARCHES; SEES CONTINUED POLITICAL DEADLOCK

REF: A. SECSTATE 17726

1B. SECSTATE 14149

1C. SECSTATE 17728

1D. BEIRUT 00231

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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11. (C) In a meeting with the Ambassador on 2/13, Acting FM Mitri accepted three U.S. demarches: a request that Arab League members take a measured approach to the newly-formed Palestinian National Unity Government; a request to order partly GOL-owned Arabsat television to cease broadcasting an Iraqi program that was inciting radical Sunni insurgents; and finally; a formal U.S response to Lebanese concerns regarding the use of cluster munitions during last summer's conflict between Israel and Hizballah. Minister Mitri had no response to the demarche concerning the new Palestinian government, but did express preliminary agreement with the U.S. request to stop Arabsat programming whose intent was to incite violence. (The Ambassador has also raised this with Minister of Information Ghazi Aridi and, twice, with Minister of Communications Marwan Hamadeh, who represents Lebanon on the Arabsat board.) The final demarche concerning cluster munitions drew a lengthy response. While stating that Lebanon understood the U.S. argument, his government emphatically expressed disagreement with it. Mitri stated the GOL continues to request a complete halt on the sale of cluster munitions to the region. Concerning the ongoing political crisis in Lebanon, the pro-reform minister said he saw little hope a solution was imminent. He used the bus explosions that had occurred just a few hours earlier as proof that anti-democratic forces were not about to compromise. He feared a new phase of political violence.  
End summary.

12. (C) Acting Foreign Minister Tarek Mitri, a trusted member of PM Siniora's inner circle, met the Ambassador, Special Assistant, and visiting NEA/ELA Office Director Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley at the Grand Serail on February 13, a day before a massive pro-reform rally was scheduled to be held in Martyr's Square a few blocks away. As the meeting started, Lebanese news stations were focused on the two commuter bus explosions that took place hours earlier in the Christian suburb of Ain Alaq. Minister Mitri still conducts most of his official business from the relative safety of the Grand Serail, but has considered it sufficiently safe to spend the night at home several days each week. Whether this morning's incident will result in tighter security for the

March 14th cabinet ministers, which were in effect at the start of the current crisis in November, is not yet certain.

¶13. (C) Minister Mitri listened carefully to the U.S. position regarding the new Palestinian National Unity Government, particularly our deep concern that Hamas has yet to announce it will accept the core principles of the Quartet: renouncing violence, respecting prior agreements, and recognizing the State of Israel's right to exist. He expressed relief that the Palestinians appear to have reached an accord that would stop the recent violence in the Palestinian territories, but stated he did not have a ready response to the U.S. request that Lebanon delay engagement with the new unity government until our concerns have been answered. Mitri indicated he would discuss the demarche with the cabinet, but did not give a precise date.

¶14. (C) Concerning our request that Lebanon use its influence as part owner of Arabsat television to direct the station to cease highly inflammatory broadcasts which originate from a Baathist-controlled television network in Iraq, Minister Mitri said he was unaware of the broadcasts, but agreed that if the programming was inciting violence against the legitimate government of Iraq and coalition forces, its broadcasts should cease as soon as possible. The Ambassador informed Mitri that both Minister of Telecommunications Marwan Hamadeh and Minister of Information Ghazi Aridi had also been informed of the U.S. concern and request. Mitri indicated he would confirm that the GOL has the authority to direct the station to cease these broadcasts and, if so, he was confident the other members of the Siniiora cabinet would support the decision to press for termination. (Separately, Marwan Hamadeh, who represents Lebanon, one of 26 "shareholders" of Arabsat, told us he would work to see

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al-Zawraa removed.)

STRONG REACTION REGARDING CLUSTER MUNITIONS

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¶15. (C) Minister Mitri waited until the entire text of the demarche concerning cluster munitions was read before responding. He said he appreciated the initial sections dealing with deep U.S. concern for the continuing casualties and the provision of more than USD 9 million in funds for unexploded ordnance (UXO) removal. Mitri also expressed strong support for U.S. requests to the Government of Israel for comprehensive locating data of the cluster munitions employed during last summer's conflict, because this would significantly improve the efficacy of the multi-national ordinance removal program.

¶16. (C) But Minister Mitri expressed strong disagreement with the U.S. contention that cluster munitions are a legitimate weapon of war whose use by the Israelis last summer was understandable due to the intense and unique nature of that conflict. Mitri maintained that precisely because the conflict was fought in densely inhabited civilian areas, Israel should have refrained from such widespread and massive employment. The minister implied that the continuing heavy toll of civilian casualties nearly six months after the cessation of hostilities was irrefutable proof that the munitions had been used inappropriately and should not be justified.

¶17. (C) Mitri said the Siniiora government understands that Hizballah, and some NGOs who are sympathetic to the organization, have cynically used the issue for political gain, but that fact does not excuse their use last summer. He was also aware that Hizballah themselves had employed the weapon in an indiscriminate manner against northern Israel. (Note: According to Mitri, a soon-to-be-released report on the 2006 conflict by the controversial UN Human Rights Council in Geneva would not be the one-sided document those skeptical of the HRC would expect: both IDF and Hizballah

would be cited for numerous violations. He said this knowledge was causing profound discomfort in Hizballah, which had been anticipating a propaganda windfall when the report is issued. End note.) Minister Mitri asked the U.S. to recall that in 1982, the then U.S. President had pushed back against heavy pressure and issued a ban on the sale of all cluster munitions to the region, a directive that remained in effect for almost six years.

¶8. (C) In closing discussion of the issue, Mitri stated the Siniora government genuinely appreciated the expeditious and comprehensive response to their expression of deep concern regarding Israel's pervasive use of cluster munitions. He indicated he understood our arguments, but completely disagreed with them. He wondered why the U.S. would make itself so vulnerable to unrelenting criticism by continued support of such an indiscriminate weapon. He cautioned that the government of Lebanon, along with Ireland and several Scandinavian countries, would press the issue hard in Oslo on 2/22 and publicly demand the U.S. to immediately cease such transfers.

#### FEBRUARY 13 BUS ATTACKS

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¶9. (C) Reflecting on the disappointing return of violence to Beirut with that morning's explosions on two commuter buses, Minister Mitri expressed his frustration with both the intractable political stalemate and the disregard for life that Syria and its proxies hold. He ruefully remarked, "Unfortunately, violence such as these bombings is easy to carry out in Lebanon." Mitri surmised the Syrians were trying to make yet another "brutal statement," but then again, almost any of a number of violent groups also had the capacity to attack unarmed civilians. The Foreign Minister said he would be asking the Prime Minister if the government would make a request for technical assistance to the U.S. similar to the FBI team offered after the attack on journalist May Chidiac in September 2005. Mitri believed PM Siniora would do so, but cautioned that the political controversy created by the Chidiac case, where Hizballah accused the government of opening Lebanon to U.S. intelligence services, may influence any final decision. The Ambassador emphasized the U.S. would be ready to consider any request to help and that an early request would probably result in a more effective investigation of the crime. Mitri

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promised to get back to the Ambassador as soon as possible. (Note: In a follow-up phone conversation later in the day, Mitri said that Siniora -- mindful of the political backlash from the pro-Syrians after the FBI help with the Chidiac investigation -- decided to ask the UNIIIC for help instead. But Siniora also told the UNIIIC that it, in turn, may wish to approach experienced institutions like the FBI for help. We will inform Washington immediately if the UNIIIC asks us for help. End note.)

#### IMMEDIATE POLITICAL OUTLOOK -- MORE OF THE SAME

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¶10. (C) Mitri acknowledged that the Lebanese people, and particularly the Christian community, have grown exceedingly weary of the never-ending political tension and recurring spikes of violence. In their fatigue, Mitri admitted that Lebanon's citizenry might soon opt for any solution that would end the uncertainty. Because Hassan Nasrallah and Michel Aoun were deliberately playing on this fear, there was a danger for the pro-reform movement that despite its promise of a far better future, the people of Lebanon may simply throw in the towel. He agreed with the Ambassador that March 14th had to offer a pro-active and near-term solution for the political crisis, instead of just responding to the barrage of criticism from the opposition. Mitri stated he would try to convince Siniora, Saad Hariri, and the other March 14th leaders to use the 2/14 rally for this exact purpose, but was

not sure if he would be heard.

¶11. (C) Commenting on the still-developing Saudi-Iranian talks (described by Saad Hariri in ref D), Mitri acknowledged that he was not optimistic. The Foreign Minister expressed gratitude that the U.S. has refrained from expressing (deserved) skepticism about any plan that involved the Iranian regime, but agreed it was difficult to believe the Iranians would seriously try to resolve a crisis they themselves had worked so hard to create. Mitri said the Saudi argument is that Iran is fearful they have released the genie of Shia-on-Sunni violence and are trying desperately to replace the cork. He said this theory sounds all well and good, but personally he felt Iran would stick with its notoriously ruthless Syrian ally, and continue its relentless campaign of destabilizing the only genuine democracy in the Arab world. He summarized, "Syria simply cannot live with the establishment of the Special Tribunal. Its crimes would be uncovered and the regime would fall. They will destroy Lebanon before that happens."

FELTMAN